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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION by IPS 9-15-16 Date 9-15-16 obtained not obt.

March 31, 1977

PARTICIPANTS: Robert Muller, Regional Representative of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees  
 Guy Prim, Deputy Representative, UNHCR  
 Patricia Derian, D/HA  
 Fernando Rondon, ARA/ECA  
 Yvonne Thayer, POL, Amembassy Buenos Aires

PLACE: UNHCR Headquarters, Buenos Aires

DISTRIBUTION: Ambassador Hill

Mr. Muller explained briefly the origin of the Latin American refugees in Argentina, and reviewed the refugee situation since the military takeover in March 1976. The deaths of prominent Uruguayan exiles Gutierrez Ruiz and Zelmar Michelini and of former Bolivian President Torres in mid-1976 and subsequent incidents of arrest, harassment and abductions of refugees have caused considerable fear and nervousness among the refugee community. Many persons, particularly Paraguayans and Uruguayans, who have been exiled in Argentina for many years are suddenly fearful for their safety and are presenting themselves to the UNHCR to register as refugees.

UNHCR has been successful in moving more than 5,000 refugees from Argentina to resettlement locations abroad, but some 8,000 remain. 300 of them are considered urgent cases. (Comment: The 300 is down from 1,000 cases classified as urgent in late 1976.) Mr. Muller is concerned that it will become increasingly difficult to find foreign countries willing to take those who remain. He is encouraging the Argentine government to help by permitting refugees who wish to stay in Argentina to regularize their status and find jobs and futures in this country.

UNHCR relations with Argentine government authorities have improved. The Argentine government has cooperated in the resettlement effort and attacks on refugees have diminished. However, isolated incidents continue to happen -- refugees are occasionally arrested, beaten up, threatened and detained. There are now 40 UNHCR-mandated refugees in jail.

Several Paraguayan refugees have been abducted recently including Dr. Agustin Goriburu who disappeared from his home in Parana in February. Muller and Prim said it appears possible that Paraguayan security forces are operating in Argentina against persons who are perceived to be an eventual threat to the Paraguayan government, including some who have been exiled in Argentina for 20 years or more. Guy Prim said that on a recent trip to Bolivia he was told by a Bolivian colonel that the Argentine military government has sent lists of wanted Argentine fugitives to Bolivia, asking that the persons, if found in Bolivia, be returned to Argentina by Bolivian authorities. The colonel added that Bolivia would do what the

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Argentine military government asked in order not to jeopardize relations with the Argentine military. Mr. Muller and Mr. Prim believe there is active cooperation between the security forces of the Southern Cone countries, but said they know of few cases of foreign exiles and refugees who have been forcibly repatriated by Argentine authorities back to country of origin. They have information on two Chileans who were apparently forcibly repatriated to Chile and said that a group of some 60 Uruguayans who were apparently abducted in Argentina have since appeared alive in custody of Uruguayan authorities.

Muller said he understood that a number of Argentines--including members of the Montoneros, People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) and other terrorist groups--are fleeing Argentina and turning up in Brazil. The UNDP offices that handle refugee matters in Brazil have recorded 50 Argentine refugee cases in recent months. So far the Brazilian government's attitude has been remarkably "pragmatic" and no incidents have occurred.

The refugee situation is a reflection of the general Argentine situation: fear, arbitrary treatment by authorities, economic difficulties. The refugee situation is not good but not as grim as it was some six months ago.

In parting, Mr. Muller said he would very much welcome more US visas for refugees from Argentina.

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The subversives' greatest victory has been convincing the military that their tactics (terror, torture) are the right ones. The progressive military officers have made supersonic advances (by Argentine standards) in winning acceptance for greater human rights protection. They are advancing one millimeter per week.

If the Argentine situation keeps going as it is now, we will have civil war and the Montoneros will win. But if the government can defeat both the leftist-fascists and the right-wing fanatics, Argentina will be an example for the world.

Send us a great Ambassador. He must be strong. Not a career man. Again, no double message.

When queried about the advisability of applying the Harkin amendment to U.S. multilateral lending, Mr. Timerman replied that the U.S. must apply it to remain consistent in its human rights policy. To do otherwise would only confuse human rights supporters and encourage those who question U.S. dedication to the cause. But just casting negative vote isn't enough. U.S. must do something positive. For example, establish the right of a country to appeal. This would create a dialog on human rights with the offending country.

It is not easy to be democratic and defend human rights in Argentina today. For example, the Interior Ministry recently complained that LA OPINION was giving too much coverage to Habeas Corpus petitions filed with local courts. Soon after Timerman rejected this complaint LA OPINION's court reporter completely vanished and has not reappeared. Timerman added that he knows the government is preparing to denounce him as a communist and the "voice of subversion" and take some "drastic action" (he did not specify) in the next few months. He concluded by observing that if he were to be killed by leftists it would merit only a small story in U.S. press. But if right-wing para-military did him in it would be front page news for weeks.

The United States must denounce human rights violations on both sides to maintain credibility. Many Argentines question American sincerity when it appears that the U.S. is mostly interested in denouncing right-wing terrorism.

  
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Argentine - Aug 9 Testimony